

APRIL 13, 1976

CAMPAIGN '76: CARTER'S CHOICE OF WORDS

ANNCR:

THE HOTLY CONTESTED CAMPAIGN AMONG DEMOCRATS FOR THEIR PARTY'S PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION GATHERED MORE HEAT THIS PAST WEEK AS A RESULT OF REMARKS BY CANDIDATE JIMMY CARTER AND THE REACTIONS OF THE PRESS AND HIS PARTY RIVALS. CHARLES MEDD LOOKS AT THE CONTROVERSY.
VOICE:

OF THE UNCOUNTED MILLIONS OF WORDS PRODUCED BY THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES TO DATE, NONE HAVE HAD THE INSTANT IMPACT OF JUST TWO UTTERED BY DEMOCRAT JIMMY CARTER. ASKED BY A NEWSMAN WHAT HE THOUGHT ABOUT GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO BREAK-UP COMMUNITIES OF A SINGLE ETHNIC OR RACIAL GROUP, CARTER BEGAN BY SAYING HE SAW NOTHING WRONG WITH MAINTAINING WHAT HE CALLED THE "ETHNIC PURITY" OF A GIVEN NEIGHBORHOOD. THE FORMER GEORGIA GOVERNOR WENT ON TO SAY IN EFFECT THAT PEOPLE SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO LIVE WHERE THEY WANT TO BUT NOT BE FORCED TO DO SO BY THE GOVERNMENT IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE ETHNIC OR RACIAL INTEGRATION.

IT WAS THE PHRASE "ETHNIC PURITY" THAT CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF THE PRESS AND, SOON AFTER, THE OTHER DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES. SUDDENLY, JIMMY CARTER FOUND HIMSELF ON THE DEFENSIVE FOR USING TWO WORDS THAT REMINDED MANY OF SIMPLE RACISM AND SOME OF HIS MORE SENSITIVE CRITICS OF HITLER'S THIRD REICH.

THE CARTER REMARK AND THE RESPONSE IT STIRRED SUGGEST THE IRONIES OF AMERICAN POLITICS. THE GEORGIA DEMOCRAT'S SURPRISING SUCCESS IN THIS YEAR'S CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN BASED LARGELY ON HIS UNCANNY ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE WITH VOTERS WHO, UNTIL A FEW MONTHS AGO, KNEW LITTLE OR NOTHING ABOUT HIM. AND WHILE HIS CRITICS HAVE CHARGED MISTER CARTER WITH BEING LESS THAN CLEAR ON A NUMBER OF ISSUES, NO ONE HAS CHALLENGED HIS PUBLIC OR PERSONAL RECORD ON RACIAL MATTERS. BLACK SUPPORT HAS BEEN A KEY FACTOR IN PLACING THE GEORGIAN AHEAD IN THE RACE FOR DELEGATES TO THE PARTY'S NOMINATING CONVENTION.

BUT PERHAPS MOST IRONIC IS THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE CONTROVERSIAL CARTER COMMENT WAS MADE. THE 1968 FAIR HOUSING ACT, DESIGNED ALONG WITH OTHER LAWS TO ACHIEVE RACIAL INTEGRATION, CONTAINS TWO SEPARATE CLAUSES. THE FIRST MAKES IT ILLEGAL TO DENY ANYONE THE RIGHT TO BUY OR RENT A PLACE TO LIVE BECAUSE OF RACE. THE SECOND CALLS ON THE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE WHAT IS CALLED "AFFIRMATIVE ACTION" TO INTEGRATE NEIGHBORHOODS. AS GOVERNOR OF GEORGIA, JIMMY CARTER WAS PRAISED FOR UPHOLDING BOTH PARTS OF THE HOUSING LAW. BUT AS A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, WHILE INSISTING ON THE RIGHT OF ALL AMERICANS TO LIVE WHERE THEY WANT, HE QUESTIONS JUST HOW FAR THE GOVERNMENT CAN AND SHOULD GO IN ENFORCING THE ARTIFICIAL BREAK-UP OF EXISTING COMMUNITIES. IT'S A POSITION THAT VIRTUALLY EVERY CANDIDATE SHARES.

BUT IN USING THE WORDS "ETHNIC PURITY" JIMMY CARTER MADE ONE OF THOSE SLIPS OF THE TONGUE THAT HAVE DOOMED SO MANY PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS IN THE PAST. THE AMERICAN PEOPLE HAVE NOW HEARD HIS APOLOGY AND HIS EXPLANATION. THEIR REACTION COULD PRODUCE THE FINAL IRONY AS VOTERS COMPARE WHAT MISTER CARTER SEEMS TO HAVE MEANT WITH WHAT THE PRESS AND HIS RIVALS HAVE MADE OF TWO ILL-CHOSEN WORDS.

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